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Title: Are MLS Graduates Being Prepared for the Changing and Emerging Roles that Librarians Must Now Assume Within Research Libraries?

Short Title: Are MLS Graduates Prepared for Their New Roles?

By: James L. Mullins, PhD, dean of libraries and professor of library science, Purdue University.

ABSTRACT

The focus of research libraries is changing to include digital resources, improving the information literacy level of patrons, and creating new partnerships on and off campus, among other things. This creates a need to recruit librarians trained in these areas and open to these changes. Library science training is a necessary foundation for preparing graduates to qualify for and excel in changing and emerging new roles. This article explores current recruitment efforts to articulate new roles and to successfully hire graduates with the skills and aptitude to fill them.

INTRODUCTION

Research university libraries in the United States and Canada are changing to meet the expectations and needs of students and faculty in a “post-print world.” The focus of research libraries today includes not only the provision of access to print collections, databases and digital resources and the development of special collections; it is increasingly including instruction in

information literacy, collaboration on e-science/data management initiatives, re-definition and allocation of physical spaces, and establishment of new partnerships on and off campus. With these changes come new roles for librarians. Are research university libraries identifying and hiring librarians with knowledge of and interest in the new roles expected of research university librarians? Where has success been realized with hiring individuals prepared to address new roles? What areas are demonstrating a lack of librarians possessing the skills to perform in new roles? If not identifying and hiring qualified new librarians, what other alternatives are being explored?

To explore whether research university libraries are identifying and hiring candidates qualified to perform new roles, and whether the pool of recent graduates of library/information science (LIS) ALA-accredited programs meet new needs, the author developed an instrument with seven questions to elicit comments of deans/directors/university librarians from nine Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions (representing ten institutions).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature identified that research libraries around the country, and to some extent internationally, are grappling with the challenge of redefining the role of research librarians. The majority of articles use a case study to focus on the experience of a single university research library. A case study allows others to learn from articulation of the problem and the process undertaken by an institution with trials, tribulations and successes articulated. Case studies can serve as a model for re-definition and re-conceptualization of the role of librarians within the

research library and the university as a whole. In addition, a case study can assure us that “we are not unique” in confronting the challenge of recruiting libraries with the skills to undertake new and changing roles.

In 2009, Karen Williams, Associate University Librarian for Academic Programs, University of Minnesota Libraries, stressed in her contribution to RLI 265 the need to identify new roles for librarians within a research library, however, as she states, “Moving from a collection-centered model to an engagement-centered one does not happen overnight. Her description of reinventing the role of a liaison librarian at the University of Minnesota drew upon the key elements identified for the role of a liaison librarian: campus engagement, content/collection development and management; teaching and learning, scholarly communication, e-scholarship and digital tools, reference/help services, and outreach to the local community. However, Williams acknowledged that “A key challenge we face in this process is that it is not unusual to find ourselves occupying and defining the new role at the same time.” (Williams, 2009)

Brenda L. Johnson, the Ruth Lilly Dean of University Libraries, Indiana University, in her article in RLI 272 in 2010 focused on opportunities for development of new partnerships between academic librarians and other faculty and departments within the university. Johnson’s introductory paragraph sets the stage for discussion of new roles with examples of titles for library professionals now in place in academic libraries: Digital User Experience Librarian, Digital Research and Scholarship Librarian, Interface and User Testing Librarian, and Repository Architecture Specialist, among others. (Johnson, 2010)

Johnson also states that the changes that are appearing within research libraries are recognized as important developments by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) by including quotes from the ARL Strategic Plan section that refers to “Transforming Research Libraries.” She then delves into two examples of new collaboration enabled by redefinition of the role of librarians; one example is discussed in this article.

The project involved collaboration between the Victorian Women Writers Project (VWWP) and the Indiana University Libraries’ Head of Arts and Humanities, Angela Courtney. Johnson describes the advent, process and success of the collaboration as an example of a unique collaboration enabled by new technology coupled with the willingness of a librarian to experiment with collaboration. (Johnson, 2010)

In addition to articles that describe new roles and relationships for librarians, additional evidence can be gained from the knowledge and/or skills requested in position search announcements advertised by research university libraries. Two recent articles that focused on the change in position announcements are discussed below.

In *Reinventing Our Work: New and Emerging Roles for Academic Librarians*, Lori A. Goetsch, Dean of Libraries at Kansas State University, provided an historical perspective of the evolution or trends of the positions being advertised. (Goetsch, 2008) She uses as a backdrop what was happening in the larger world as it relates to technology, the economy, and communication and its related impact upon the academic research library. Her intertwining of the larger environment and its impact upon the world within academic research libraries helps us see today that the

forces at play fifteen or twenty years ago, are still forces that are acting upon academic research libraries today, only that the specific circumstances and the options open to us have changed. Specifically her analysis of the relationship of the changing technology environment and the creation of positions in the Libraries that have the title web or digital reflected in them.

In 2009 Younggok Choi and Edie Rasmussen explored what qualifications and skills were expressed as important for digital librarian positions in academic libraries job announcements in *College and Research Libraries News* from 1999 to 2007. Their findings indicated that “the literature suggests that job requirements for librarians are changing, and are including abilities that require knowledge of current technology, such as web page design and internet searching, and that employers seek job candidates with interpersonal and communication skills as well as technological skills.” (Choi, Rasmussen, 2009)

Even a quick review of the findings by Choi and Rasmussen indicate that the research library world has moved beyond searching for library professionals with skills in web or internet expertise, skills that now seem routine and in many instances, a tool to use, rather than a desirable trait for a research librarian. The research they undertook helped identify the need to integrate specialists within the library who are not educated as librarians, but whose skills and knowledge are necessary both for the library to fulfill its mission and the librarians to be effective in their work.

These articles along with others substantiate that there is a changing role for academic research librarians. These new roles require different characteristics for librarians as well as different

skills and knowledge. The intent of the author's research is to help identify ways in which LIS programs can work with research library directors to most effectively address training of students who can assume these newly defined and changing roles.

METHODOLOGY

To reduce the time commitment on the part of many ARL directors, the author elected to proceed with a volunteer, random focus group. A solicitation was sent to all ARL directors, requesting volunteers willing to answer questions on their experience with filling librarian or library professional positions in the past three years at their institution. Given this was a random sample of directors willing to be surveyed, it was anticipated that the resultant cohort would be representative of the following groups of ARL research institutions: United States – Public; United States – Private; and Canadian. These three groups (excluding national libraries and other entities not affiliated with a university) are represented within ARL as follows: United States – Public – 60%; United States – Private – 27%; and Canadian – 13%.

Nine ARL directors/deans/university librarians volunteered to be surveyed. They represented the following institutions:*

United States – Public:

Penn State University

Texas Tech University

University of Arizona

University of Massachusetts – Amherst

University of Tennessee

United States – Private:

Case Western University

Emory University

Northwestern University

Canadian:

McMaster University

University of Saskatchewan

* The dean at Penn State University recently moved from the University of Tennessee and, therefore, was able to reflect experience at both institutions.

The sample focus sub-groups compared to their representation within ARL were:

Focus sub-group		ARL	
Category	Representation	Category	Representation
United States, Public	50%	United States, Public	60%
United States, Private	30%	United States, Private	27%
Canadian	20%	Canadian	13%

Table 1

Even with this small focus group, the proportion of group representation to population was considered acceptable, since at least two Canadian institutions needed to be included in the survey to provide input from more than one Canadian ARL member.

SURVEY FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

To keep the telephone interview to under an hour, the author created nine questions addressing the experience of the director/library in hiring new LIS graduates in the past three years. The questions were sent to each participant prior to the interview; all conversations occurred in early 2011. The questions asked of all participants were:

1. During the past three years has your library recruited to fill beginning librarian positions (requiring less than three years of experience)? If so, how many?
2. Were you searching for “non-traditional positions”?
3. What was/were the area/areas of specialization?
4. What was the particular expertise you were looking for in the position?
5. Did you have a reasonable pool of candidates?
6. Were there many qualified candidates?
7. Did you identify, interview, and offer the librarian position? If not, why?
8. Does it appear that library/I schools are preparing new graduates to assume positions within the changing environment of research libraries today?

9. If it appears that library/I schools are not preparing new graduates to assume positions within the changing environment of research libraries, what alternatives are you exploring to fill positions?

Non-traditional roles of librarians were not closely defined in the initial communication with each participant; rather the only parameters provided were that non-traditional positions be outside of the traditional areas of reference, collection development, and technical services. These parameters allowed flexibility in each participant's response on what they considered to be non-traditional. Notation was kept on each response in order to compare overall perceptions on availability as well as what the participants considered to be non-traditional.

FINDINGS

1. During the past three years has your library recruited to fill beginning librarian positions (requiring less than three years of experience)? If so, how many?

The number of recent hires ranged from two to ten, with a mean of five. Several participants stated their number of hires was lower than was typical, primarily the result of the economic downturn and not a lack of desire to hire new librarians. Several stated that they were expecting to hire at a higher rate during the next one to two years.

2. Were you searching for "non-traditional positions"?

When asked to discuss the mix between traditional and non-traditional positions for their searches, the response was: 1) none (no position for which a search was being undertaken would be considered non-traditional), 2) mixed (some were traditional and some were not), 3) no position for which a search was undertaken would be considered traditional. Several respondents mentioned that there were traditional elements even in the most non-traditional positions, since certain aspects of librarianship transcend technology to draw upon principles of library science in new and non-traditional ways.

3. What was/were the area/areas of specialization?

A wide range of non-traditional positions were identified; the more unique ones were: Virtual Librarian - investigating new ideas and ascertaining feasibility (Texas Tech); Digital Archives (Emory); Data Services Librarian (PhD in statistics) - assist in librarian research (Saskatchewan); Scholarly Communication Librarian – jointly funded by Library, Graduate School, Office of Research, and Provost, (Arizona); Scientific Fluencies Librarian (information literacy in the sciences), (McMaster); Social Sciences Librarian to work with data management, (McMaster); Gaming Librarian – information literacy (McMaster); and Teaching & Learning Librarian – pedagogy, embedded in teaching and learning center (McMaster).

4. What was the particular expertise you were looking for in the position?

The responses to this question raised comments about the qualities sought when hiring a librarian particularly one in an area that is unique or when creating a new role within the library. Examples are: curiosity (Texas Tech); adaptability, flexibility, confidence and ability to interact with users outside the library, and a passion to educate (Penn State and Tennessee); can do attitude with team oriented attitude (Arizona); ability to think “outside the box” (Northwestern).

5. Did you have a reasonable pool of candidates?

Consistently the response was it depended upon what was considered “reasonable.” For some of the more non-traditional, creative librarian positions there may have been a considerable number of applicants, but those who seemed to understand and relish the opportunity to work in a position that allowed for entrepreneurship and creativity was a small number. It also appeared that successful candidates tended to be those who had entered librarianship after other careers either in higher education (digital humanities – Emory); or the military (GIS specialist – Emory).

6. & 7 Were there many qualified candidates? Did you identify, interview, and offer the librarians positions? If not, why?

Not all respondents stated that they were able to fill a position and complete the search, however, the preponderance did. There were two exceptions: a failed search for a head of

special collections which resulted in merging two units (Northwestern) and two failed searches for business fluencies and media fluencies (McMaster).

The skills that appeared lacking in the opinion of the director and search committees were the candidates' inability to be proponents for the libraries, that is, have the requisite people skills that would allow them to serve as liaisons or ombudsman for the library with a department or with faculty.

Out of the number of positions identified by the respondents, approximately seventy-five percent were filled by satisfactory to outstanding candidates. A search of the literature did not identify a study that could be used as a benchmark for the typical success of a librarian search in the past.

8. Does it appear that library/I schools are preparing new graduates to assume positions within the changing environment of research libraries today?

Answers to this question ranged from: "Not really... depends on the school," to "Can't count on MLS/MLIS program to deliver what is wanted."

Others answered by singling out specific LIS programs for being more in tune with the need of academic research libraries, those included: University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, University of North Carolina, Syracuse, Simmons, and the University of Alberta. This list

should not be considered definitive since the geographical distribution of the respondents would likely affect their experience with particular LIS programs.

Those schools that were near highly ranked LIS programs had a greater likelihood of identifying candidates who were prepared for non-traditional library positions. There was a general consensus among the focus group that the qualifications and preparation of the graduates of the LIS programs were uneven. Additionally, there were some particularly strong negative comments about the quality of several of the distance education programs offered by LIS providers, in particular those that had no residency requirement.

9. If it appears that library/I schools are not preparing new graduates to assume positions within the changing environment of research libraries, what alternatives are you exploring to fill positions?

The responses to this question generally focused on the need to invest in the training of the new librarian; that it shouldn't be assumed (and the comments given elsewhere support this) that the new librarian will begin work with the requisite knowledge or skills to do the job expected. Every director surveyed commented on the need to mentor either through a formal program within the library or through professional development available at workshops or conferences. Texas Tech invests in new librarians by supporting their attendance at the CoveyFranklin, *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*.

What was consistently mentioned in answer to this question was that directors are looking for new librarians who have a spark, an energy for what libraries are now and what they will be in the future, and who feel that the ambiguity that is today's library will be an opportunity not a threat.

Can LIS programs instill this in a student, or does it have to be part of what is considered when admitting students to the LIS program? These questions and many others are waiting to be researched. In this project only the surface was scratched as to what is happening in the search for librarians for the 21st century. This study can only indicate areas of concern or success, later more in depth surveys and focus group studies will be able to ascertain the specific strengths, knowledge, and training that a new LIS graduate should have at their command to help guide and lead research libraries well into the 21st century.

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